

Bisexuality in men exists but cannot be decoded from men's genital arousal

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Jabbour et al. (1) ask “whether some men have a bisexual orientation” and, by measuring men's genital arousal, conclude that the answer is yes. Jabbour et al.'s results potentially make a valuable contribution to the literature on sexual orientation. However, this contribution is occluded by underlying assumptions that affect their analysis and its interpretation in a nontrivial way.

Jabbour et al. assume that among men, bisexual orientation is deserving of skepticism, whereas monosexual orientations (heterosexuality and homosexuality) are not. Consequently, they misrepresent the current state of knowledge by claiming that bisexuality in men “has remained controversial” among scientists. Bisexuality in men has long been accepted by the vast majority of scientists (2); the contrary view lies outside the scientific consensus.

If anything, Jabbour et al.'s results raise questions about the veracity of monosexuality. Jabbour et al. measure genital arousal by neutral stimuli or by erotic videos featuring men or women. They quantify arousal as the difference between the subjects' responsivity to men and women, divided by the within-subject SD. On this measure, 5 to 10% of exclusively and predominantly monosexual participants showed more or same levels of arousal in response to the gender they are supposedly unattracted to. Jabbour et al. suggest this result is a sampling error, but it may be compatible with research showing that a fair amount of self-identified monosexual men had sexual relationships with and are physically attracted to both men and women (3, 4).

More importantly, Jabbour et al.'s analysis hides an important aspect of their data. Consider a hypothetical

scenario in which most men are attracted to men and women alike. In this scenario, even though attractions are unequal, one would be justified in claiming that most men have a bisexual attraction. This is, in fact, what Jabbour et al.'s results show: When compared to neutral stimuli, most men show genital arousal to both men and women (Fig. 1).

Does this mean that we should be skeptical of self-identified heterosexuals and gay men? Hardly. To substantiate a theoretical claim, one's measures must have good construct validity. Otherwise, one cannot generalize the findings to real-life phenomena, let alone make predictions (5). In this case, the complexity of sexual orientation (6) cannot be reduced to genital arousal. Thus, even if Jabbour et al. were correct to assume that bisexuality in men deserves skepticism, they greatly exaggerate the usefulness of their research to arbitrate on this issue. This is unfortunate because such overstatements of findings reduce confidence in the scientific enterprise (7, 8).

It is well known that sexual identity, behavior, and attraction do not necessarily go hand in hand (3, 4, 6). Documenting these patterns is an important endeavor that advances our understanding of human sexuality. However, this should not be framed as an evaluation of the validity of sexual orientations. Subjective as it is, our best method of gauging people's orientation was and remains self-identification. To suggest otherwise can have the unintended consequence of feeding into the prejudicial and harmful practice of doubting bisexual men and labeling them as confused or lying about their orientation (9, 10).

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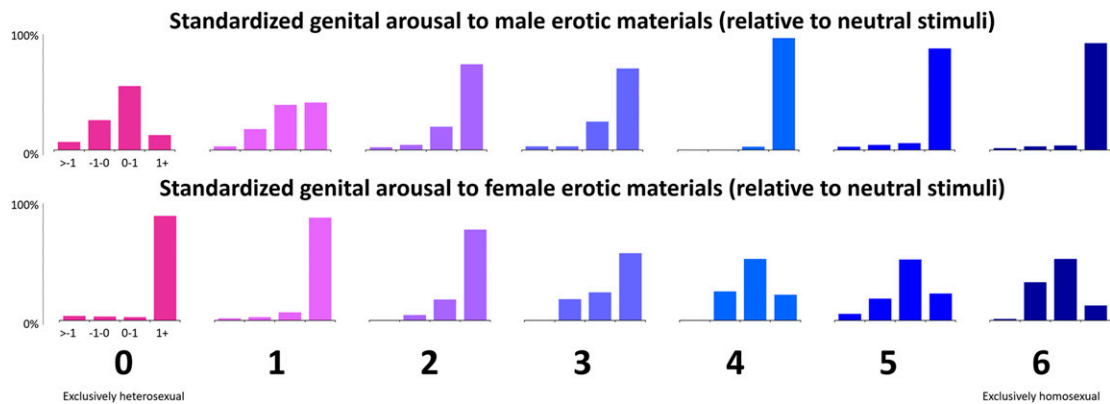


Fig. 1. Standardized genital relative to neutral stimuli (measured as within-subjects z scores) as a function of Kinsey scale score.

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